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ABSTRACT

The ways in which accrediting team members perceive their role and make decisions were surveyed and approaches for improving the process were analyzed. The policy and procedures statements of the regional commissions were evaluated and a mail survey of a sample of evaluators was undertaken. Evaluators from five regional associations provided assessments regarding the onsite accreditation visit, as well as the procedures they used during their most recent visits. Attention was directed to the purpose of the onsite evaluation visit, sources of procedures used during the visit, evaluation activities onsite, and indicators of quality and types of evidence used. While nine purposes of the onsite visit were mentioned and each region had its own emphasis with respect to the function of the evaluation team, there was no within-region comsistency regarding the purpose of the visit in the several policy manuals published by the respective regional commissions. Evaluation team members were asked to identify purposes of the onsite visit perceived as important and to specify the role that best characterized their function on the site visit team. Evaluators also indicated the sources that most influenced the procedures they used on site. The allocation of evaluators' time among various onsite activities provides an indication of both evaluators' priorities and the means used by evaluators to fulfill purposes of the accreditation visit (e.g., evaluation, verification of the self-study). Evaluators also identified the one area they were most qualified to evaluate and the types of evidence they used in determining whether the institution was meeting its objectives. Six recommendations for regional accrediting commissions are offered. (SW)

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REGIONAL ACCREDITATION TEAM MEMBERS:

HOW THEY PERCEIVE THEIR ROLE AND HOW THEY MAKE DECISIONS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Postsecondary institutional accreditation, as it is currently carried out by regional and specialized accrediting associations, is an integrated process consisting of three major steps: 1) an institutional self-study conducted by the college or university, 2) an onsite evaluation visit conducted by a team of peers, and 3) a decision by a review commission of the association regarding whether or not to accredit the institution or program. This paper focuses on the second step of these integrated processes--the function of evaluation teams in the regional accreditation of senior colleges and universities. The purpose of this paper is to provide a descriptive and critical analysis of the way in which accrediting team members perceive their role and how they make decisions, together with conclusions and recommendations for improving the process.

Background

Commentators and critics of higher education policy have repeatedly questioned aspects of the accreditation process. Troutt (1979) and Harris (1979) have questioned the efficacy of the process for quality assurance and improving the quality of education. Harcleroad and Dickey (1975) have argued that accrediting teams should employ more systematic procedures for certifying the accreditability of an institution--procedures similar to those which business auditors use in certifying corporations. Koerner (1971) and Riesman (1980) have challenged the cozy relationship between evaluators and the evaluated institutions. Riesman has also criticized the "considerable variation, not only within each region in terms of particular teams visiting particular institutions, but among the regions" (pp. 335-336).

Oulahan (1978) has considered accreditation from a legal perspective and notes the potential for litigation regarding due process, consumer protection, and libel. With respect to due process, Oulahan analyzes accreditation-related court decisions and concludes that accreditation decisions must be supported by "substantial" and "sufficient" evidence to guarantee the institution's due process--a finding with clear implications for the onsite evaluation.

Recent studies have probed almost all aspects of the regional accreditation process and have provided empirical data to clarify policy discussions. These studies include assessments of regional accrediting criteria (Phillips, 1979; Petersen, 1979); the institutional self-study (Kells and Kirkwood, 1978); the selection and training of evaluation teams (Kells, 1979 and Cooney, in process); analyses of accreditation reports and commission decisions (Samors, 1975); and the institution's expectations and satisfaction regarding the accreditation process (Parrish, in process; Prosser, 1978; Warner, 1977; Romine, 1975).

To date, no studies have documented the function of the evaluation teams--what they actually do onsite and how they make their determinations. More specifically, no studies have assessed the extent to which evaluation teams do what they are purported to do in regional accrediting commission policy statements. Accordingly, this paper will report findings from 1) an analysis of the policy and procedure statements of five of the six regional accrediting commissions, and 2) a recently completed national survey of 349 evaluators representing these five regional commissions.

2. METHODOLOGY

Three discrete data sources were tapped in conducting the study: 1) the policy and procedures statements of the regional commissions, 2) the mail survey of a sample of evaluators, and 3) the review and comment on the findings by regional commission professional staff.

As a first step, the regional accrediting commission policy and procedures statements were reviewed to determine the expressed purposes and functions of the onsite visit. Next, a survey of a sample of evaluators from each region[1] was conducted to obtain their perceptions regarding the onsite accreditation visit as well as the procedures they used during their most recent visits. The sample of evaluators was drawn by obtaining rosters of evaluation teams from each region and selecting at random a sufficient number of teams to provide approximately 70 evaluators from each region. This "cluster sampling" of evaluators was used to assure a sample that provided a balance of the types of expertise usually included on evaluation teams (e.g., administration, student services, educational programs, financial affairs). Each evaluator in the sample was sent a pretested questionnaire which elicited demographic and home institution information, perceptions regarding the function of the onsite visit, and procedures used in the onsite decision-making process. A response rate of 82 percent was achieved without using follow-ups or call-backs, providing a residual sample of 286 evaluators for the analysis. Table 1 summarizes the populations from the respective regions surveyed and the response rates for each region.

Table 1. The Sample of Regional Accreditation Teams

	NE	MS	SO	NC	NW	TOTAL
Number of team visits in 1980-81[2]	32	20	32	54	8	146
Number of evaluators in 1980-81[3]	202 (199)	146	347	234 (209)	62 (59)	991
Sample size (n)	71	73	70	76	59	349
Response rate (%)	80.3	76.7	78.6	82.9	88.1	82.0
Percentage of the population responding	28.6	38.4	15.9	30.1	88.1	28.9

[1] Five of the six regional associations agreed to participate: New England, Middle States, Southern, North Central, and Northwest.

[2] Initial or reaffirmation team visits during 1980-81 made to senior colleges and universities; visits to two-year institutions were not included.

[3] Numbers in parentheses represent an unduplicated count of team members. Some evaluators served on more than one evaluation team during 1980-81.

The following limitations and qualifications to the study should be noted:

1. The study was limited to regional accreditation of senior colleges and universities. Two- year and vocational institutions were not included, nor was specialized or program accreditation included.

2. The study focused on initial and reaffirmation accrediting visits; visits purely for consultation, pre-visit review, or follow-up review were not included.

3. The study was intended to provide a descriptive assessment of regional tendencies rather than an effectiveness evaluation of team performance.

4. Because regional accrediting is heavily influenced by the respective regional commission policy and procedures, the study sample was designed to produce regional estimates of team functioning rather than national estimates. Any interpretations based on national totals must be made with caution.

5. Responses to particular questions by team members may be influenced by (a) "the design effect" associated with cluster sampling caused by intra-cluster correlation (Cochran, 1977), (b) random-sampling error associated with the relatively small percentage of evaluators sampled (20 percent in Southern), or (c) the lack of representativeness of institutions visited by a given region's teams during 1980-81.

6. The study data are based on (a) a content analysis of regional policy and procedures statements and (b) the self-reported perceptions of evaluation team members. Evaluator self-reports were not cross-validated by empirical evidence such as report inspection or interviews with officials of the institutions they visited.

Because the sample was selected to produce regional estimates, the data were reported out in cross tabulations by region, with Chi squares indicating the probability levels associated with regional variation. Standard error estimates were also provided, enabling the reader to compute approximate confidence intervals for response percentages.

As a final step, regional commission staff reviewed the draft findings in order to validate the principal investigator's interpretation of the data or to suggest alternative interpretations.

3. FINDINGS

The following findings utilize a content analysis of regional policy and procedures as well as the results of the survey of evaluators. The findings address four issues: (1) the purpose of the onsite evaluation visit, (2) sources of procedures used during the visit, (3) evaluation activities on site, and (4) indicators of quality and types of evidence used.

Purpose of the Onsite Visit

The ultimate purpose of the onsite visit in each of the regions is to make a professional judgment regarding the accreditation of the institution and to make a recommendation to the commission. The functions of the team in the process of making this judgment are as follow:

1. Provide consultation: New England, Middle States, Southern, North Central, Northwest.

2. Determine whether the institution is meeting its objectives: New England, Middle States, North Central, Northwest. This function appears to be implicit in Southern Association policy statements.

3. Determine educational quality: Middle States, Southern, North Central, Northwest.

4. Assess strengths and weaknesses: New England, Middle States, North Central, Northwest.

5. Obtain evidence: New England, Middle States, North Central, Northwest.

6. Validate the Self-Study: New England, Middle States, Southern, Appears to be implicit in North Central statements.

7. Determine whether the institution has clear and appropriate objectives: New England, Middle States, North Central.

8. Determine whether regional criteria are met: New England, Southern, North Central.

9. Perform an educational audit: New England, Middle States, North Central.

While each of the regions has its own emphasis with respect to the function of the evaluation team, there was no within-region consistency regarding the purpose of the visit in the several policy manuals published by the respective regional commissions.

Evaluation team members, who had either been trained by the regional commissions or had studied evaluator manuals, were polled regarding their perceptions of the purpose of the onsite visit. Table 2 depicts regional differences in the perceptions of those purposes deemed to be important by the evaluators. None of the regions appears to typify the "national pattern" of responses, i.e., each region has established its own priorities.

These data indicate that Southern and North Central evaluators tend to be almost unanimous in rating the commission criteria-function as "important;" Middle States evaluators have less of a consensus regarding that function. For Middle States evaluators, whose commission guidelines emphasize evaluating institutional effectiveness in terms of the institution's own objectives, the determination of clear and appropriate objectives appears to be a consensus priority. Similarly, Middle States evaluators have less of a consensus regarding verification of the self-study.

Table 2. Purposes of the Onsite Visit Perceived as "Important"

	NE N=58	MS N=58	SO N=54	NC N=63	NW N=52	AVG N=285	X^2
To determine whether the objectives are clear and appropriate	79.3	91.4	77.8	90.5	82.7	84.6	.04
To determine whether commission criteria are met	74.1	64.3	94.4	95.2	80.8	82.0	.00
To verify (validate) the self-study	67.2	46.4	68.5	68.3	71.2	64.3	.13
To determine institutional integrity	69.0	67.3	45.3	66.1	61.2	62.1	.07
To determine educational quality	57.9	70.7	47.2	52.4	69.2	59.4	.12
To provide consultation and technical assistance	15.5	19.3	13.2	30.2	17.6	19.4	.28

Evaluation team members were asked to identify the role which best characterized their function on the site visit team. Table 3 displays evaluator responses to the question: which function best describes your role on an evaluation team?

Table 3. Major Role as Perceived by Evaluation Team Members

	NE N=58 %	MS N=58 %	SO N=55 %	NC N=63 %	NW N=52 %	TOTAL N=286 %
Educational Consultant-- to provide program/management review and feedback	5.2	5.2	5.5	6.3	5.9	5.6
Educational Evaluator-- to determine effectiveness in meeting institutional objectives	72.4	79.3	32.7	61.9	78.4	65.0
Educational Auditor-- to verify the information in the self-study	13.8	8.6	12.7	11.1	3.9	10.1
Educational Investigator-- to determine whether the institution is in compliance with regional standards	6.9	1.7	43.6	15.9	11.8	15.7
Other	1.7	5.2	5.5	4.8	0	3.5

X^2 probability = beyond .0000

A clear majority (65 percent) see their primary role as evaluators whose function is to determine the institution's program and managerial effectiveness in meeting its objectives. The major regional variation to this response was in the Southern Association where 43.6 percent perceived their chief function to be to determine the institution's compliance with commission standards.

Source of Procedures

Further insights into the function of the evaluation teams were derived from asking evaluators what sources most influenced the procedures they used on site. Table 4 summarizes the findings from this question by citing the sources listed as "most important" by regional evaluators.

Table 4. Most Important Determinants of Procedures Used On site*

	NE %	MS %	SO %	NC %	NW %	TOTAL %	X^2
Procedures determined by the team (N=284)	46.6	37.5	40.0	68.3	26.9	44.7	.00
Procedures specified by the Commission (N=284)	45.6	38.6	60.0	27.0	48.1	43.3	.04
Self-developed procedures suited to the institution (N=282)	8.9	26.3	10.9	9.7	21.2	15.2	.30
Self-developed procedures routinely used (N=278)	5.3	5.4	3.7	1.7	11.8	5.4	.24

* Some respondents rated more than one source as a 1. Thus, column totals equal more than 100 percent.

The major determinants of procedures used by team members are those decided jointly by the team and those specified by the commissions. Team-developed and self-developed procedures suited to the institution are both likely to consider individual differences, and a majority of all evaluators put a premium on this consideration. Regional variations in sources of procedures include a preference of one-third of the Middle States and Northwest evaluators for self-developed procedures. One-fourth of Middle States evaluators prefer to adapt procedures to the specific institution. Southern evaluators are most conscious of the importance of commission procedures and North Central evaluators tend to rely on team-developed procedures. Northwest team members exhibit more individualistic, inner-directed preferences than other evaluators.

Evaluation Activities

The allocation of evaluators' time among various onsite activities provides an indication of both evaluators' priorities and the means used by evaluators to fulfill purposes of the accreditation visit (e.g., evaluation, verification of the self-study). Evaluators typically put in a 10-hour work day and a total of 32 hours of onsite activities. These activities are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5. Allocation of Evaluators' Time On Site

Activity	Avg. No. of Hours Per Evaluator
Team Meetings	8
Interviewing Faculty	6
Interviewing Administrators	5
Report Writing	4
Inspecting Records	2
Inspecting Equipment and Facilities	2
Interviewing Students	2
Interviewing Board Members	1.5
Observing Instruction	1
Other Activities	.5

Indicators of Quality and Types of Evidence Used

In an attempt to tap the evaluation expertise of each of the evaluators, each respondent was asked to identify--in the one area he or she is most qualified to evaluate--(1) the major indicators of quality, (2) evidence used in verifying the existence of quality, and (3) evidence used in determining that an institution was meeting its objectives. As Table 6 illustrates, the evaluators were able to specify a wide range of indicators of quality. The evaluators were not, however, able to specify types of evidence in other than the most general terms, e.g., interviews, inspecting records, examining reports of specialized accrediting reviews.

Evaluators also reported on the types of evidence they used in determining whether the institution was meeting its objectives. Again, as Table 7 indicates, some of the types of "evidence" used were general references to sources of evidence.

Table 6. Indicators of Quality: Choices of Evaluators

Indicators	1st Choice N=254		2nd Choice N=240		3rd Choice N=217		4th Choice N=166	
	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank
Staff/faculty qualifications	33.2	1	16.7	1	8.8	2	3.6	8a
Organization/management provisions	8.3	2	3.8	9a	6.0	5a	.6	27a
Curriculum	7.1	3	7.1	2	6.9	4	4.2	6a
Course offerings	4.7	4a	4.6	5a	1.9	19a	1.2	24a
Other	4.7	4b	6.3	3	6.0	5b	9.6	1c
Fiscal stability	4.3	6	3.3	13a	3.2	12a	1.8	19a
Library resources	3.2	7a	3.8	9b	7.4	3	3.6	8b
MIS/financial statements	3.2	7b	.8	26a	.9	24a	1.8	19b
Student outcomes-academic	3.2	7c	5.9	4	4.6	7	4.2	6t
Teaching effectiveness	2.8	10a	2.5	17a	4.2	8a	3.6	8c
Objectives achieved	2.8	10b	.4	30	.9	24b	1.2	24b
Access and service	2.4	12a	1.3	24a	2.8	14a	4.8	5
Student outcomes-other	2.4	12b	2.5	17b	4.2	8b	9.6	1a
Resource allocations	2.0	14	4.2	7b	3.2	12b	2.4	16a
Management capability	1.6	15b	2.5	17c	4.2	8c	3.6	8d
Enrollments by programs	1.6	15c	2.9	15a	2.8	14b	1.2	24c
Responsiveness of programs to student needs	1.6	15d	1.7	22a	.9	24d	1.8	19e
Planning	1.6	15e	1.3	24b	2.3	18	3.0	13c
Student/faculty satisfaction	1.6	15a	3.3	13a	3.7	11	8.4	4
Research/publications	1.2	20	4.2	7a	1.9	19b	3.0	13a
Faculty/student morale	1.2	20	.8	26b	1.4	21b	3.0	13b
Buildings/equipment	.8	22a	4.6	5b	9.3	1	9.6	1b
Communications	.8	22b	1.7	22b	1.4	21c	2.4	16b
Admissions and graduation criteria	.8	22c	.8	26c	.9	24e	.6	27c
Caliber of students	.4	24a	3.8	9c	1.4	21a	1.8	19c
Evaluation modalities	.4	24b	2.1	20a	2.8	14c	3.6	8e
Participatory management	.4	24c	2.9	15b	2.8	14d	1.8	19d
Teacher commitment	.4	24d	2.1	20b	.9	24c	.6	27b
Academic advising	0		0		.5	29	.6	27d
Tests/exams	0		.8	26d	0		2.4	16c

Table 7. Evidence That an Institution is Meeting Its Objectives

Evidence	NE N=46 %	MS N=46 %	SO N=41 %	NC N=51 %	NW N=47 %	TOTAL N=231 %
Materials and interviews	34.8	39.1	26.1	19.6	34.0	30.7
Student/faculty satisfaction and perceptions	4.3	10.9	4.9	21.6	12.8	11.3
General performance indicators	15.2	13.0	9.8	7.8	10.6	11.3
Graduate outcomes	6.5	15.2	2.4	11.8	12.8	10.0
Programs and enrollments	4.3	8.7	14.6	5.9	10.6	8.7
Curriculum, faculty, and placements	13.0	0	12.2	13.9	2.1	8.2
Congruence of programs with plans	6.5	0	14.6	7.8	8.5	7.4
Records and reports	10.9	6.5	4.9	5.9	4.3	6.5
Other	4.3	5.6	9.8	5.9	2.1	5.6

X^2 probability = .0267

The sources of evidence cited in this table reflect predominantly subjective, widely varying interpretations of what is meant by evidence. Again, there are three types of evidence reported by the evaluators.

1. Generalized sources, loosely specified, e.g., materials and interviews, records and reports, and "other." Almost half (43.1 percent) of the evaluators cited such sources.

2. Input measures of performance, e.g., programs and enrollments, program s implemented compared with programs planned. Sixteen percent of the evaluators used these measures.

3. Outcome/impact measures of performance, e.g., general performance indicators, such as student test scores; placements; graduate outcomes; student and alumni satisfaction; and the curriculum and faculty compared to placements of graduates. Forty-one percent of the evaluators used outcome or impact measures to assess whether an institution was meeting its objectives. Over half (54.9 percent) of the North Central evaluators specified outcome-related measures.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The purpose of the onsite evaluation visit in regional accreditation is not clearly and unequivocally stated within regional policy and procedure statements. Of the several purposes variously attributed to the

The following recommendations were prompted by the foregoing conclusions:

1. Regional commissions should clearly specify the purpose of the evaluation visit in light of the overall purposes of regional accreditation.

2. Regional accrediting commissions should develop an evaluation framework, or genre, to guide team members in accomplishing the purposes of the visit. This framework may be an educational audit, an effectiveness evaluation, a comprehensive case study with specified component methodologies, or some other model appropriate to the purpose of the visit.

3. Regardless of which framework is selected, regional accrediting commissions should take a systematic approach to its implementation and continuation. That is, regional policy and procedures regarding the evaluation visit should use consistent terminology and be framed in such a way that the self-study guide; the site visit evaluation model; and team selection, training, and evaluation procedures are all integrated into a mutually compatible whole.

4. Regional accrediting commissions should make use of a coordinating mechanism, such as the Council for Postsecondary Accreditation, to develop state-of-the-art techniques and consistency across regions with respect to the meaning and purpose of the evaluation visit. This recommendation should <u>not</u> be construed as recommending <u>uniformity</u> of policy and practice across regions.

5. Clearer specification of purposes and procedures for the site visit may reduce the proportion of time spent on site in team meetings. Nonetheless, the regions should work with chairpersons in making more efficient use of meeting time and in maximizing the time which the team spends in obtaining evidence and documentation for the evaluation report. The hour that the average evaluator spends in observing instruction might be better applied to inspecting records or interviewing students and instructors.

6. Regional accrediting commissions should draw upon the evaluation expertise within academe in the development of an appropriate evaluation model for the site visit. There is a place for <u>evaluation professionals</u> in the design of this aspect of accreditation, along with higher education administrators and program specialists.

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